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**Some thoughts on language,
on contrasts between English and Inuktitut,
and teaching English to Inuit children.**

Revised Edition

Education Programs and Evaluation Division
Department of Education
Northwest Territories



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INTRODUCTION

People going into a northern settlement for the first time will probably find everything new and strange for a while. One of the most basic and immediately-apparent differences, between the new qallunaaq (non-Inuk) teacher and the majority of the children and parents, is language. In the Keewatin and Baffin Regions, and many settlements of the Arctic Coast, the first language children learn is Inuktitut (Eskimo). This means, of course, that communication between child and teacher, and in many cases parent and teacher, is much more difficult than in "southern classrooms" and requires some adjustment.

Language, then, becomes a matter of concern and thought. In this booklet some ideas are presented about language in general, and Inuktitut in particular, in the hopes that it might assist you in your teaching by indicating some of the problems that Inuit children encounter because of language differences. It is not intended that this booklet "teach you Inuktitut", because there are grammars and courses better designed for that and because, of course, you don't learn a language from reading about it. However if you try (even unsuccessfully) to learn the language, you are demonstrating a willingness to "meet people half-way" and you will better realize the problem Inuit children have in learning English.

This booklet was written, and subsequently revised in 1979, by Lorne Smith of the Personnel and Staff Training Division of the Department of Education, Northwest Territories.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Strange as it may seem we are not sure how to define language. Is it, as Boas suggests, "communication by means of groups of sounds produced by the articulating organs"? If so, must all visual signs (e.g. deaf-mute language) be excluded and should animal sounds and calls be included in language? Perhaps Sapir's definition is a bit more satisfactory. "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". The key word here is non-instinctive (i.e. learned) although research into communication systems among higher orders of animals (such as porpoises and apes) is raising questions as to whether or not only humans have language. Some things, however, are certain about language.

1. All normal people have the capacity to speak and understand a language.
2. Language is learned, not inherited through genetic transmission (although the capacity for learning to speak is transmitted genetically¹).
3. A language is made up of sounds produced by the modification of streams of air by the articulatory apparatus, i.e. vocal cords, mouth, tongue, lips, etc. For example, no known language makes use of sounds of cracking knuckles or the hollow sound of beating the chest to make up "words" (although such nonverbal communication systems might be important supplements to a language).

¹ If proof is needed, consider, for example, Korean babies adopted by American parents. The children do not grow up speaking Korean.

4. No known language makes use of all the possible variations of sounds a human can produce, to use as "building blocks" to construct words. Each language uses only a small selection of possible sounds as building blocks for words. Any two languages will have some common sounds.

5. All languages have a "grammar" or set of rules which govern the sound system and the way in which words are put together to express thoughts and meanings. Most people, however, are not aware of these rules: rules of grammar must be inferred from the way people speak.

It might be also proper to include here what language is not. Language is not reading. This cannot be over-emphasised. Thousands of languages in the world have, or had, no system of recording speech by making marks on paper or scratching on stone or whatever.² This fact is sometimes forgotten in the classroom, where reading is often stressed to the detriment of oral competence. A child must be able to speak before he is taught to read a language if true competence is the goal: how many of you "learned" French for several years by reading passages and doing exercises from texts, then found you couldn't speak the language? Or can "read" aloud a paragraph in French but don't know what any of the "sounds" mean?

Another major misconception is that a language can somehow be "primitive", "underdeveloped", "unable to deal with abstractions", "concrete": this is nonsense. All known languages in the world have the total capacity for communicating in abstract terms, can deal with past, present and future events, and can adapt to new ideas and conditions.

² The situation is changing as outsiders (often missionaries, as with Inuktitut) develop or adapt existing writing systems for recording languages which had no writing system.

The way that languages carry out these tasks does, of course, differ. And certainly the terms for certain items may or may not be developed in some languages because of cultural factors. For example, in our society we have lots of terms for those things important to us. We have four wheel motor vehicles; muscle cars, wagons, dragsters, pickups, hard-tops, sports cars, sedans, convertibles and so on. An Arab nomad on the other hand probably has only one or two words for these types of cars but you can bet he has an awful lot of words for camels! Even within our own society we have this difference in terminology. City dwellers know there are cows, bulls and calves, but a rancher would no doubt have a long list of special words for different kinds of cows, bulls and calves. You have probably heard that the Inuit have a great many words for what we describe with one word "snow". For example:

qanniq - falling snow

natiruviaqtuq - snow drifting across the ground

piqsiqtuq - snow blowing through the air restricting visibility

igluskak - snow suitable for building igloos

maujaq - deep soft snow

Does this mean that English is a more primitive language than Inuktitut because it has less words for snow, but a more advanced language than Arabic because it has more words for cars?

These kinds of examples might indicate that some languages are more efficient for discussing certain subjects than others, but any "deficiency" will be made up as it becomes necessary to develop new terms. For example, in Keresan, an Indian language of New Mexico: for the object we call "car", a Keresan speaker uses the word for "bird";

For "fender", a Keresan speaker uses the word for "wing";

For "horn", a Keresan speaker uses the word for "call";

For "lights", a Keresan speaker uses the word for "eyes";
For "exhaust pipe" ... Guess what!

In other cases words may be borrowed, often with modification of sounds, from another language rather than "invented" in order to fill a need. In Inuktitut, for example, a snowmobile is a "sikituu", tea is "ti", jacket is "japa". Word borrowing for new items goes both ways, of course as iglu (meaning a house in general), becomes igloo (meaning specifically snowhouse) in English; qajaq becomes kyak or kayak and so on.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

All languages, as we have said, have certain common features.

1. Language is sound. That is, sound has primacy over writing. The writing systems are made up of arbitrarily chosen symbols, which represent the sounds or concepts normally conveyed through speech. The sounds of the language are produced by the articulating organs (mouth, vocal cords, etc.).
2. Language is linear. That is, the order in which sounds are produced is important to meaning, as in "pit" and "tip". When we come to write a language the symbols may be recorded in any logical sequence. English is written from left to right, but other languages go right to left or up and down when written (Arabic, Chinese). A child does not naturally or instinctively "read" pictures in a story sequence left to right. This skill - a conventional, arbitrary way of decoding pictures or words - must be taught.

3. Language is systematic. There are rules for joining sounds together. English combines the sounds n and g in the word "bring", "sing", etc., but not z and m, nor can an English word start with the letters ng..... Other languages, however, may well use these combinations.
4. Language is a system of systems. There are rules governing the sounds we may use, rules governing how sounds may be joined to make words, rules governing how words can be joined to make sentences.
5. Language is meaningful. The whole point of language is communication, and the unfamiliar sounds of another language are perfectly meaningful to those who have learned the code.
6. Language is arbitrary. The sounds of a language have no meaning in themselves. It is only because the speakers of a language have "agreed" that a particular combination of sounds has a certain meaning:
maison (French)
iglu (Inuktitut)
house (English)
There is nothing intrinsic in the object, concept, thought, etc. which dictates any set combination. Some words may imitate the sounds a thing makes, but these words are very few, and even then are often "coloured" by the language of the speaker.
7. Language is creative. In this paper so far I have no doubt put words together in an order which has never been done before and will probably never be done again, yet it is perfectly understandable to any speaker of English (I hope!). Poets and writers and story-tellers are specialists in the creative use of language.

8. Language is a system of contrasts. Language "works" because we are able to hear, with training, the difference between "p" and "d" so that we can distinguish "pen" and "den", "man" and "mat" and so on. The sounds, which speakers of a language "hear" as being different, become an important point and one that must be discussed more thoroughly.

VARIATION IN LANGUAGES

If you were to travel around the world (or around a big city) you would hear a great variety of languages. This variation is possible because a small number of sounds, usually less than 50 or 60, (although Hawaiian uses only 13) is selected from a much larger number of possible sounds to construct any single language. Each language also has different sets of rules for building words and joining words into sentences.

In learning a language and in teaching English to Inuit children it is useful to know which sounds in English do not have counterparts in Inuktitut and vice versa. What we will be doing is looking at the phonetic systems of the two languages. If this were a text book in linguistics, a map of the mouth would be included, with all the parts of "articulatory" apparatus labelled. Sounds would be described by the way in which they were formed: tongue against teeth, through nose, breathing in, breathing out, and so on. If you are seriously interested in a more scientific approach, a look at a linguistic text would be useful.

The phonemes (sounds) of Inuktitut are:

- the three vowels approximating: i as in key
a as in pan

	u as in ch <u>u</u> te
- consonants approximating	
the sounds of English:	p
	t
	g
	m
	n
	n as in si <u>ng</u>
	s
	r squeezed, softly, out of the
	back of the throat
	l
	j as in ya <u>wn</u>
	v
	k

and q which is a "k" produced far back in the throat. There is no equivalent sound in English: German comes close to it with ach.

(Different dialects may modify, or substitute, especially the consonants: for example, "s" in the East becomes "h" in the West.)

From this list it is obvious that not all the phonemes (sounds) of English are used in Inuktitut. Again I stress that this does not mean Inuktitut is a "primitive" language - it merely shows that in Inuktitut the phonemes which have been selected from the very large number of possible kinds of sounds are a different selection from the phonemes "selected" for English. Also, it does not mean an Inuk cannot distinguish or reproduce the differences in English phonemes, or vice versa. All normal humans can learn to make the sounds of any language, even the "click" phonemes of some African languages, because all normal humans have the necessary vocal apparatus and brain control centre to make this possible. It is simply a matter of practice and example. It may seem impossible to "get your tongue around" some strange sound in another language,

but you can do it. It does become more difficult, however, as you get older. In general, the best time to learn a second language is in the first 12 years or so; after that the human capacity to learn a new language slowly begins to deteriorate.

Some consonants present a special problem for Inuit children. Consider the following:

<u>English</u>	<u>Inuktitut</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Inuktitut</u>
p) b)	p	k	(k q
t) d)	t	r	(r g
f) v)	v		
s z) (h)	s		

Try this ... say "pin", "bin", "pin", "bin", "p", "b", "p", "b" While you are saying "p", "b", consciously think about how you are making these sounds: Where is your tongue? What do you do with your lips? What do you do differently to differentiate "p" and "b"? When do you use your voice? The two phonemes are very similar, and in fact the only difference is that in "b" your vocal cords are taut and vibrate as your breath is expelled. This is called voicing. In English, "p" and "b" contrast because of voicing. Voicing allows us to differentiate between the words (morphemes) "pin" and "bin", "pan" and "ban", and so on. If you do the same exercise for t, d and f, v a similar contrast will be found. But in Inuktitut there is no distinction made between "p" and "b". There is one phoneme "p" which may sound very similar to English "p" sometimes and very similar to English "b" at other times. The same holds for "t", "d"; "f", "v"; and "s", "z".

A speaker of Inuktitut learning English may not realize that there are two phonemes in English for the single phonemes (p, t, v, s) in Inuktitut. The speaker of Inuktitut has to learn to hear the contrast between the voiced and voiceless English phonemes and to produce the phonemes, otherwise he is likely to confuse the meanings of morphemes (words) which differ only by a single phoneme.

A good way to illustrate and practise these new sounds is to make use of minimal pairs. A minimal pair is two words which differ in only one sound (bit, pit). The contrast between the different sounds and their effect on meaning can be taught through carefully planned oral drills: "He gave me a bill." - "He gave me a pill."

"She gave him a bat." - "She gave him a pat."

"Where is the cold tab?" - "Where is the cold tap?"

Minimal pair drills can be used for all phonemic contrasts, whether they occur at the beginning, middle or end of words. They can be used for points of grammar as well (inflections, gender, number and so on), provided that the two items being contrasted differ in one way, and one way only.

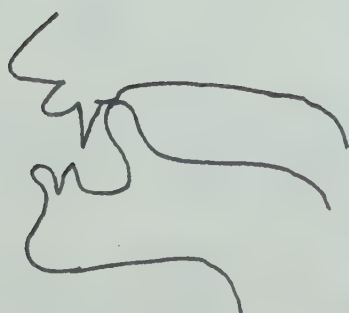
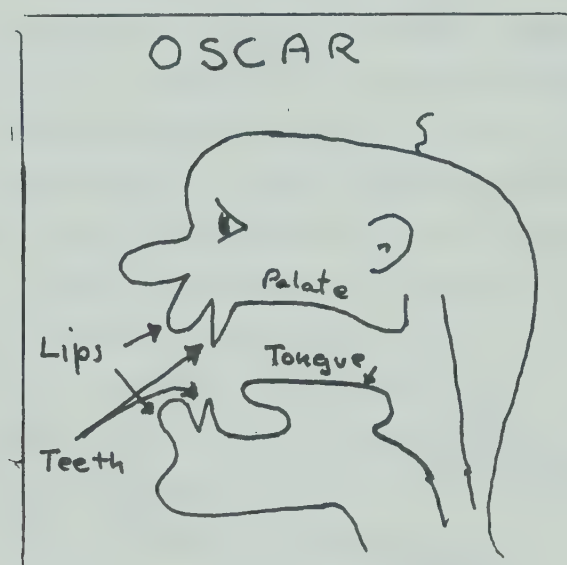
Inuktitut also differs from English in using only three vowels. I, a, and u as in peel, pal, pull. English has ten vowels. In different Inuktitut words the vowel sounds may be pronounced similar to the other seven English vowels, but for the purpose of the Inuk using his language the range of sounds are "classed" or "identified" as belonging to three types. In linguistic terms, the different forms of the same vowel sounds are allophones.

Try this: say e as in peel, then slowly open your mouth while drawing your tongue back. The vowel sound changes to produce the sounds as in peel, pit, pate, pet, pat, pot (front vowels). Continue but now close the mouth and round the lips to produce: Paul, pole, pull, pool (back vowels). Now pucker your mouth as if sucking

a lemon and say "e" as in eel; chances are you'll end up with the French sound "u", a difficult sound for Anglo's to make!

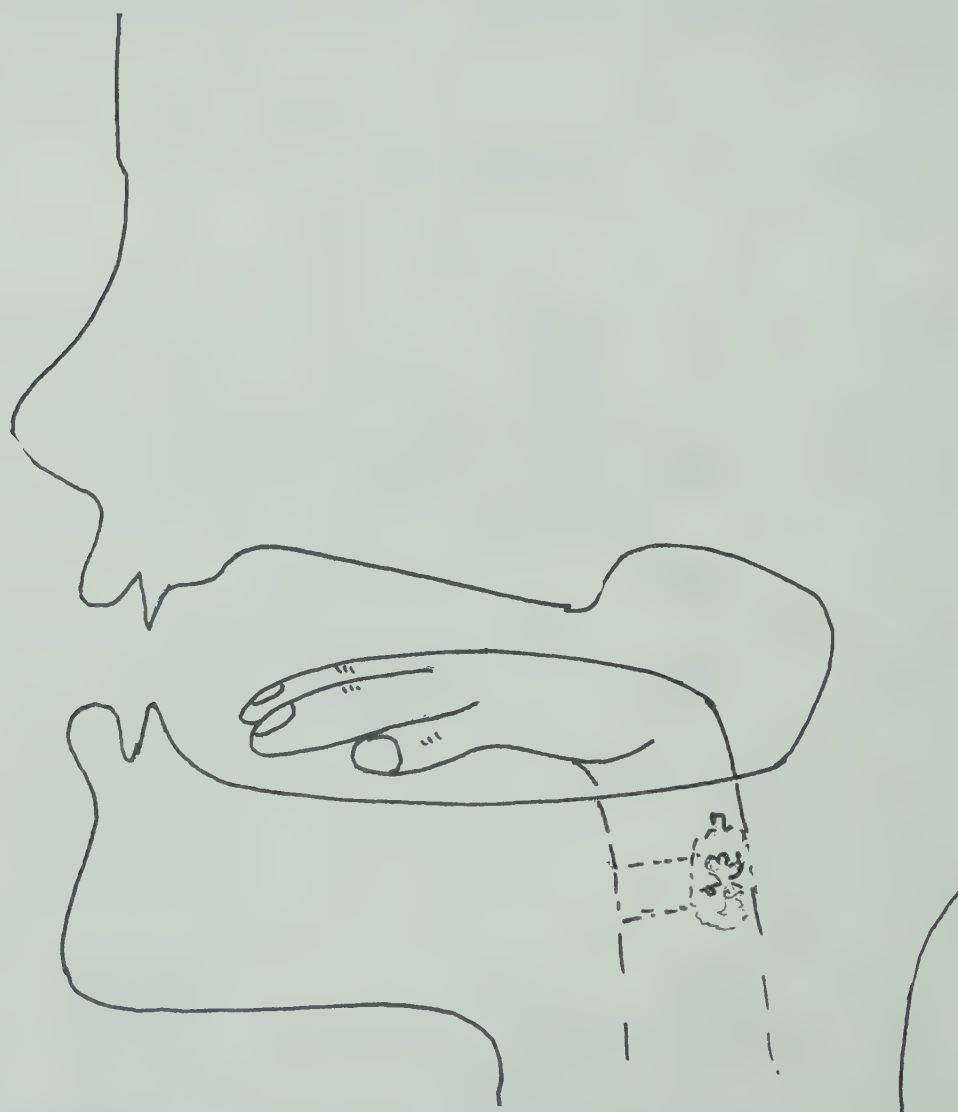
Knowing something about how sounds are actually made can be very useful when helping children make them for the first time.

Because a speaker of Inuktitut may not hear the difference in some English sounds, it will be difficult for him to produce them. An "Oscar" - a cross-section diagram of the mouth - can help show the student how to move the tongue, teeth and lips when trying to make a new English sound.



A large Oscar can be made from bristol board or can be quickly drawn on the blackboard, and the teacher can use his/her hand as the tongue, while saying the sounds. Oscar likes working with individual children best, although he can work with larger groups once he has been introduced. The point is that even younger children can be made aware of how sounds are made, and that it can be fun.

A moveable Oscar using the hand.



When it comes to the Inuktitut phonemes "k" and "q", it is the English speaker's turn to miss basic contrasts. In Inuktitut, there is the phoneme "k" which corresponds to the English "k" as in kick. But there is also a phoneme which to the untrained qallunaaq ear sounds the same as "k" but is in fact as different in Inuktitut as "t" and "d" are in English. This phoneme is usually represented by the symbol "q" or sometimes especially in older books using a non-standard orthography, "kr". It is produced like a "k" but further back in the throat. In linguistic jargon "k" is a velar stop, "q" is a uvular stop. An Inuk speaking English who uses "q" instead of "k" will be understood because a qallunaaq listener will hear the "q" as a "k". The contrast will not make a difference in the meaning of the English words. But a qallunaaq speaking Inuktitut and confusing "k" and "q" could end up saying "qaaquq" (he explodes) rather than "kaakpuq" (he is hungry). This is a fairly significant difference in meaning. To reduce problems which result from these phonemic differences between English and Inuktitut, it is important for students to hear examples of the contrasts and to practise producing these sounds themselves. Phonemic variation is only one of many differences between English and Inuktitut. Phonemes are arranged to make up Inuktitut morphemes (words) in ways different from English and, of course, the grammar or structure of the two languages is very different.

CONTRAST

Some other very basic ways in which Inuktitut and English contrast is in (a) word order (b) word building and (c) inflection.

Word Order: In English, word order is important to meaning. For example, "The man shot the caribou" and "The caribou shot the man",

contain exactly the same words, but mean two very different things. The sentences can be analysed as noun + verb + object. In Inuktitut say:

Inuk tuktumik siquqtitsijuq man caribou shoots (he)
OR Siquqtitsijuq tuktumik Inuk shoots (he) caribou man
OR Inuk siquqtitsijuq tuktumik man shoots (he) caribou

An Inuk speaker will understand from all of these that a man is doing the shooting. In this sentence the subject or doer of the action is indicated by the absence of any marker to the stem Inuk (man). The stem word tuktu (caribou) however, carries the suffix "/mik" which marks this as being receiver of the action in this sentence. The word order then is not as important in Inuktitut as in English because the function of the word is indicated by the use of suffixes (we can consider no "ending" as being the suffix zero). To those who have taken Latin this explanation will be old hat. From this it should be obvious that word order could present problems to Inuit children learning English, because not only is subject-object word order important for meaning, but there are even subtle differences in the order in which adjectives are used. e.g. "my big black dog" not "my black big dog". Have fun explaining that one!

Word Building: Both English and Inuktitut use affixes for building words. There are three types of affixes: suffixes (added to the end of words); prefixes (to the beginning) and infixes (inserted in the middle of words). A fine old example in English is:

establish - a single morpheme which cannot be
 reduced and still retain meaning
establish + ment
establishment + arian
establishmentarian + ism
dis + establishmentarianism
anti + disestablishmentarianism

Unlike English, Inuktitut does not use prefixes but does make extensive use of infixes, units of meaning added between the stem and the final inflection or suffix. The order in which infixes are inserted into words is important in Inuktitut. For example using the infixes "lauq" and "sima":

qajakkut aullalauqsimavit? Have you ever left by kayak?

qajakkut aullasimalauqpit? Had you ever left by kayak?

Word building can change a single base word to a much longer word that would require a sentence to explain in English. For example:

iglu - house

iglunga - his/her/its house

iglungamut - to his house

iglungamungavuvuq - he goes to his (another person's) house

It is important to recognize that a construction such as this is not simply a string of words as it would be in English, but a single word conveying a complete "closed" message, as does an English sentence. Inuktitut uses word building of this kind to a far greater degree than does English.

When beginning to learn English, the student will often assume English uses the same rules as Inuktitut and will therefore apply and use Inuktitut pronunciation, rules and word building techniques when speaking English. This is known as interference of the first language with the second, and can often account for such errors as "I home", for "I am going home"; "Don't fall it" for "Don't make it fall".

In Inuktitut the equivalent of "Don't fall it" is perfectly acceptable, because one can take a root word and make it act as different parts of speech such as noun, adjective or verb with the appropriate modification. This is possible to some extent in English. For example a teacher teaches, a fisherman fishes for fish; a carpenter, however, works with wood.

Errors can actually be a sign of learning when they are a sign of overgeneralization of rules in the second language. For instance the student who has learned the plurals cats, dogs, forks may say mans, womans, instead of men and women. The student has formulated a rule about English plurals (add "s") but has not learned the exceptions to the rule. But errors of generalization are a positive sign that the pupil is thinking about the language.

Inflection: All languages are "inflected" to some extent, but the degree to which they are inflected varies a great deal. English, when compared with other languages, is about average. For instance, we can "inflect" or modify many words in English by using suffixes or prefixes. e.g. dog ... dogs; done ... undone.³ Inuktitut makes more extensive use of inflection than English, as indeed it must, because inflection must be used to indicate the role of certain words, whether they are subject, object, etc.

Another major cause of difficulty is the use of the definite and indefinite article in English. In English the articles are separate morphemes the and a(n). In Inuktitut, the definite and indefinite articles are not separate morphemes, but the specific and the general cases are indicated by the particular form the sentence takes. The sentence "tuktu takuvara" - "I see the caribou", or "tuktumik takuvunga" - "I see a caribou". In learning English the student has to learn how and when to use the separate morphemes the and a(n). The confusion increases, of course, when we consider a sentence such as "I see clouds" where there is apparently no article. A look at this set:

singular	"I see the cloud"	...	"I see a cloud"
plural	"I see the clouds"	...	"I see clouds"

³ This is slightly different from word building in that the base word is only modified rather than introducing new elements.

shows that the plural form of the indefinite article is, in fact, zero. Now try to think up a simpler explanation for your grade two class! From problems like this though, you can see that you will have to begin thinking a lot about what goes on in English grammar.

Inuktitut does not have separate personal pronoun words equivalent to he, she or it. Pronouns are expressed through verbal endings. In learning English, therefore, errors will occur until the Inuk learns that in English we do make this distinction. The process is made harder because we inflect the basic forms to produce special forms.

This is not to say that English handles the third person better, or more accurately. Consider the sentence: "He is happy because he arrived." This is ambiguous and can mean that some person, let's call him Sam, is happy because he (Sam) has arrived home from work or shipwreck on a desert island. It can also mean that Sam is happy because Tom arrived - or vice versa.

Inuktitut avoids this common ambiguity by using a special fourth person form:⁴

"quviasukpuq qaigami" He is happy because he (himself) arrived.

BUT

"quviasukpuq qaingmat" He is happy because he (some other person) arrived.

GENDER

In English, we have he things and she things, and then supposedly all non-human things are its. This is complicated by our insisting

⁴ Many other languages also use a fourth person form.

on calling cars, ships and hurricanes "she". The French insist that everything is sexy (that figures) and if you've ever gotten your "le's" mixed up with your "la's", you know what I mean. Not all languages categorize things in this manner. For example, in Cree things are animate or inanimate and, as in French where English speakers have difficulty seeing why one thing is masculine and another feminine, some things animate may seem pretty dead to non-Cree speakers. For example the tree is inanimate but the leaves are animate. In Inuktitut there is no problem with sex. There is one third person only, with no distinction between he, she or it. Now this doesn't mean that Inuit can't tell males from females (otherwise you wouldn't have a job), but simply that in Inuktitut sex is not used to classify words. The lack of general markers in Inuktitut is carried over into traditional Inuit names. Males and females could have the same names, so drills such as "Kanayuk has a cat. That is her cat", "Pitsiulak has a dog. That is his dog." should also include the forms, "Kanayuk is a girl, Pitsiulak is a boy.", because the name may not automatically trigger the response Kanayuk = female = her. Pitsiulak = male = his. The wide use of christian names in addition to Inuit names now helps to overcome this confusion. Note, however, that parents often address children by their real Inuit names, and that many children will be more used to them than to their christian names.

LEXICAL RANGE

Not restricted to Inuit learning English, but common to all who learn any second language is the concept of lexical range. For example, "He fell" can refer to a child tripping over a twig and falling to the ground as well as to a child falling from the 14th floor of a highrise. In Inuktitut, however, pallaktuq is used

when a person trips or falls from a low height, whereas, ijukkaqtuq is used when the fall is from a height that would cause severe injury. A qallunaaq learning Inuktitut could cause considerable consternation if he told another that her child "fell" in the playground at recess by using the inappropriate "ijukkaqtuq". This works both ways. The Inuk may use words in English in a broader sense than they normally have: "May I spill the milk?", instead of, "May I pour the milk?". In Inuktitut the one word kuvisijuq is used for pour or spill a liquid, because in Inuktitut pour and spill are not important differentiations. However, a different word, "naavisijuq" is used to pour/spill a solid like sugar or flour. Inuktitut does not distinguish pouring from spilling*, but English does. English does not distinguish between the flow of solids from that of liquids: Inuktitut does. Here is a case of overlapping range in the use of words or concepts. Knowing this can happen, and watching for it when problems arise will make your teaching easier. When teaching "spill" for example you will need to go about the classroom spilling liquids and solids accidentally-on-purpose; and make sure you use solids and liquids when teaching "pour", so that children can see and grasp the concept easily.

Non-verbal communication can also cause problems for the teacher: teachers simply may not understand or receive the silent messages flying around the room. Children especially may respond to questions by raising their eyebrow (yes) or wrinkling their noses (no). Sometimes these actions are subtle and swift and the teacher may often miss them, resulting in some misunderstandings: "Why don't you answer me, Noah?", "I have answered him why does he keep asking the same question?"

* Of course "pouring accidentally" - the meaning of spill - can be and is expressed in Inuktitut.

Inuktitut, in common with many other languages, does not classify quantities as singular or plural. English does. In Inuktitut, there is a singular form for one, a dual form for two and a plural form for three or more:

tuktu 1 caribou

tuktuk 2 caribou

tuktuut 3 or more caribou

The Inuk speaker, in learning English, must learn how to handle the dual case in English. Drills of the type "You have one gun. I have two guns. We have three guns." can be useful. Also, as much as possible, the regular plural inflections (base word + s) should be mastered before the irregular cases (e.g. mouse, mice; sheep, sheep) are introduced. As with the case of the fourth person, there is the danger that a young speaker of Inuktitut may not learn the singular, dual and plural forms properly and begin to use the English pattern of singular and plural even when speaking in his own language.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this discussion will be of some help to you in teaching of English (and other subjects) to Inuit children. An attempt has been made to indicate some of the areas of which differences in the sound systems and structure of English and Inuktitut can cause confusion for the Inuk child. Hopefully, an awareness of some of the major differences may make it easier to resolve the confusion. It should be noted, however, that this is obviously a pretty fast, superficial treatment of the subtleties of Inuktitut, and the problems encountered by students of a second language.

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